Religiopoliteness Linguistic Modifications: Evidence from Shiite Contexts in Iran

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Politeness studies are oftentimes concerned with certain polite manners in general human interactions and exchanges where both parties, usually individuals, are in direct contact with one another. Religiopoliteness strategies are, in addition, rather concerned with, hence confined to, cases where the context is both markedly and remarkably religious, and the recipient of such a mode of honorification is a markedly sublime Islamic religious personality. Shiite religious contexts in Iran where the ceremonies are held in Persian show certain linguistic modifications that indicate and account for the overly religious coloring and character of the ceremony or public religious service. These linguistic modifications and adaptations concern the following tiers: phonetics, phonology, morphology, semantics, and pragmatics. These changes aim to indicate that the context is markedly religious and, on the individual level, they are markers of politeness in an Islamic religious context. Granted the linguistic modifications made are not part of standard Persian grammar, but incorporated for religiopoliteness purposes, such short-term changes may provisionally be referred to as audience-oriented religiolinguistic modifications, for the purpose behind making them is just exerting certain religio-ritual effect on the audience. Such religio-polite modes of reference seldom aim at any face-saving strategy or purpose, rather the aim for the preacher or conductor of the ceremony is to show his sincere, religious devotion as salient and effectual as possible so as to make his speech as religiously charged and moving as possible.

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Both as a medium and as a faculty, language serves several purposes. These include, inter alia, thinking, communication, and moralization. The last one, i.e., moralization, seems to be closely linked with politeness. [1] Politeness constitutes the socio-moral cornerstone of most Oriental cultures for communication. [2] On the other hand, religion, and in the present case, Islam, is a powerful religious magnet and source of inspiration that has exerted ineffaceable influences on Muslims' modes of thinking, value systems, and individual and social behavior.

Religiopoliteness seeks to study politeness in a religious context. As such and in this case, it deals with modes and manifestations of politeness in Islamic religious contexts. Just as "[r]eligious language is the portion of natural language people use in religious talk" (Ross, 1998, p. 106), religiopoliteness seeks to study modes of linguistically polite behavior in Islamic religious contexts, here emphasis is on Shiite Islamic contexts in Iran. [3]

In the Persian-speaking Iranian Shiite context, there are several linguistic strategies to religionize a context. [4] Religionization of a context or an event may prove necessary because the main act to be done may not have anything to do with religion. An example

of such an act can be drinking some juice or water. To religionize it, the person who feels thirsty (or simply wishes to drink) the juice or water utters *bismillah* [5] before drinking and thanks Allah when finished. [6]

In the Iranian context, there are several linguistic strategies that to religionize a context or setting. The first one is observable on a phonetic-cum-phonological tier. As there is no voiceless pharyngeal fricative sound (i.e., Arabic ح) in Standard Persian, Persian-speaking preachers, elegizers, and eulogizers, incorporate this sound in their performances when they come to pronounce a positively religiously-charged name, e.g., Husayn, when the referent is the third Infallible Imam al-Husayn. The reason seems to be that the preacher intends to show his religious politeness and linguistic meticulousness. [7] Such deliberate Arabicizing the pronunciation of a personal name occurs mainly, if not exclusively, in the case of the laryngeal fricative sound /ح/. Other specifically Arabic phonemes seldom receive such a linguistic treatment. [8]

Phonetically, there is a phenomenon of religious honorificatory lengthening (on analogy with compensatory lengthening in phonology) in Persian Shiite Islamic ritual contexts. In such cases lengthening the vowel of a stress-bearing syllable in a di-/polysyllabic Arabic proper name has a ritual function: asking for the audience's ritual response. For example, in the case of the name "Muhammad" when the referent is the Prophet Muhammad, if the preacher pronounces this name with an additional length given to the second vowel, i.e., /mo-HA::M-mad/, the audience regard it as an intonational signal to utter *Salawaat* to discharge their respect for the Prophet Muhammad. This kind of additional vowel lengthening, often followed by the preacher's pause for the audience to respond, has a polite and honorificatory, respectful character. It is a mark of politeness on the preacher's side, and a hint for the audience to utter Salawaat as a highly recommended ritual.

On the morphological tier, Arabic dual (تثنية) form is incorporated in Standard Persian Islamic religious discourses. Morphologically, there is no dual form in Persian: it has only singular and plural, just like English. However, in Islamic religious contexts, Arabic dual forms appear, e.g., "*imaamayn-e humaamayn* (امامين همامين)", and *Hasaneyn*, correctly *Hasanayn* (حسنين). Likewise, the name of the city of al-Kadhimiyah (الكاظمية) is pronounced as "*Kaazemeyn*" or "*Kaazemayn*", with the former resembling lay-person pronunciation, in contrast to the latter that sounds the correct Arabic pronunciation.

The semantic tier deserves special attention. Semantic contagion, particularly Islamic orientation, is observable in such contexts. By "semantic contagion", it is meant "the automatic adaptation of word meanings to their verbal environments when discourse is in traction" (Ross, 1998, p. 106). To Islamically religionize an activity which by essence does not have any value, whether positive or negative, e.g., drinking water, or starting a serious academic debate, it is enough to utter "*bismillah*". In this case, it must be properly called "religious contagion", for it sheds a light of religiousness on the whole act. It is certainly both the meaning and the intention of the performer who flavors the act in a religious manner. On analogy with linguistics in which there are negative and positive "polarity items", one may deduce that there must be some sort of "religious polarity items" of which the Arabic formula "*bismillah*" serves as a good example.

It seems that based on the basic notion of semantic contagion, the presence of an Islamic religious formula in the beginning of a discourse, event, or act functions not only as a way to religionize the discourse that follows but also indicates (hence implies) a sense of reliopoliteness. By the same token, starting and finishing a prayer, sermon, or any religious service with pronouncing *Salawaat* (uttered at least one or sometimes three times) marks both religiosity of the performer(s) of the ceremony and highlights the religious character and content of the context.

It appears that morphopragmatics can also shed light on such religious contexts. In Persian, the Arabic name Allah is translated as both “Khodaa” and “Khodaavand”. Out of these two names, the latter which is one syllable longer appears in more formal contexts. Similarly, out of the names Ali and Ali b. Abi Talib, the latter appears in more formal contexts.

Use of certain old Arabic terms is prevalent on the semantic tier. Similar phenomena on the semantic tier include using words such as "khaareji", in the sense of "rebel(s)", when the preacher intends to quote and make a reference to the way the pro-Umayyad Damascenes used to address the survivors of the Ashura tragedy of Karbala in 61 AH/ 680. Apart from such historical contexts, in present-day Persian, the word “khaareji” means “forein”, a word that usually has a positive connotation. Elsewhere, in the advanced level lectures of the Qom Shiite Seminary, it is customary to use the phrase "Khaarej-e salaat", rather than "Khaarej-e namaaz". These instances show that there is a noticeable preference for Classical Arabic words and expressions where the context is markedly Islamic.

On the oral-discourse level, while recounting certain tragic scenes of the Ashura tragedy, it is polite not to mention the heart-rending scene of Imam al-Husayn's martyrdom. Famous preachers oftentimes leave it unsaid while the audience continue shedding tears profusely, for it would be regarded as somewhat impolite to tell all the tragic details so graphically. This deliberately leaving the account unfinished emanates only from the preacher's sense of discharging politeness. In most cases, before getting into such details, the preachers expresses his sincere apology to Imam al-Mahdi, the sayyids (present in the session), and the ulema (prominent religious scholars) who are among the audience. It is believed that the 12th Infallible Imam al-Mahdi witnesses it, albeit he has long been in a state of major occultation.

Seeking apology, as indicated in the previous paragraph, is a religiopolite linguistic act. It can also be regarded as a Wittgensteinian language-game, or even an Austinian or Searlean speech-act, all due to its having its grammar, intention, addressee, and an addresser, plus its purposefulness in a given language community. Here, it would be more appropriate to regard such a use of language as a "religious language-game", for it occurs only in a specific Shiite religious discourse.

I would rather have a slight digression here. Scholars, whether linguists, sociologists, anthropologists, or philosophers oftentimes maintain two main functions or key roles for human languages. That is to say, people use language for (1) thinking and

solving problems, and (2) individual and social communication. Based on the data under study, it seems that people use language for (3) expressing emotions, (4) discharging their sense of politeness, and (5) performing their religious duties of offering prayers, however primitive or advanced their religion may be. [9]

On the pragmatic tier, the use of certain religious formulas gives religious coloring to the whole context. [10] Here, it is both the external and real-life religious setting and the presence of religiously-charged words and phrases, those linguistic items that can well be designated as "religious polarity items", on analogy with "positive/ negative polarity items" (in semantics) are present and influence the whole context and/or discourse. For example, uttering *Salawaat* or *bismillah* in the beginning of any task gives it a religious coloring. [11] There are several other words and phrases that both indicate the utterer's intention and bring about the hearer's reaction. One such item is the short phrase "Yaa Ali". Originally an Arabic vocative addressed to the first Infallible Imam Ali, it serves several purposes: from encouraging someone to do a task to a simple phrasal prayer to expressing amazement. [12]

On a discoursal tier, most religiously mandatory rites and acts are preceded and followed by certain complementary rituals. For example, Quran recitation sessions start and finish by reciting *Salawaat*. Apart from the abundant religious rewards attached to it, this act or ritual is imbued with religiopolite overtones and implicatures.

Religiopoliteness is most observable in addressing positive figures. Although a great majority of highly respectable religious figures are not physically present (or no longer biologically alive), they are addressed with utmost respect as if they were alive. Religiopoliteness can likewise be viewed from a moral perspective. For example, the Holy Quran, as the intact and authoritative Word of Allah, teaches men to respect their parents. This religious attitude and injunction leads us to certain moral, if not ethical, consideration of religiopoliteness. Based on Quranic teachings, everybody ought to do good to their parents, they should not annoy them. Similar considerations bring to the fore the need to develop a basically Islamic framework of religiopoliteness. This is because, prior to being individualistic and interpersonal in character, Islamic religiopoliteness has ethical, social, and educative, and politic character and purposes.

Islamic religiopoliteness relies on higher moral and belief standards. In contrast to customary linguistic politeness studies in which politeness come from face-saving and social distance considerations for achieving better and more desirable benefits and results in one's transactions, Islamic religiopoliteness has a much more profound and far wider horizons that deserve more pervasive, penetrating, and philosophical attention.

Notes:

1. It seems that the moral aspect of language use, i.e., use of language for moral purposes and/or moral education, must have been a serious research void. This aspect of language does not seem to have received the due attention in linguistics, moral literature, and communication studies.

2. It is questionable, if not a reason for feeling pity for, that there have been at least two groups of scholars who have not paid the due attention to religiopoliteness: Western linguists plus the non-Western linguists who were trained in their camp, and a great majority of Muslim scholars of Islamic religious studies who have access to first-hand data and are themselves pious practising Muslims.

3. Politeness may have at least three manifestations: linguistic, gestural, and ritual. While in linguistic manifestation of politeness, language is used, in the gestural mode of politeness, some gestures indicate the performer's sense of discharging politeness, and yet in ritual politeness, both linguistic and gestural forms of politeness are observable.

4. There are several local languages and dialects in Iran. Despite this linguistic panorama and diversity, Persian has long been the national language in the nation. In this paper, special attention is given to Standard Persian.

5. "*Bismillah*" is already an Arabic loan word that has entered the lexicon of English in the late 18th century, for more information. It is indicated as a headword in the following works: *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, 4th edn.; *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 12th edn.; and *The Chambers Dictionary*, 11th edn., to mention just a few.

6. This is a practice with liquids that are religiously permissible (mubah) to drink.

7. It is not the case with the names of notorious figures in the Islamic history; their names are pronounced like the rest of names as pronounced in Standard Persian.

8. On the prosodic tier, Iranian Quran reciters oftentimes follow famous Egyptian Quran reciters. This is a very demanding task, and those who achieve it, practice it for better, more polite and appealing performances.

9. Based on Heiler (1932 [1918]), it appears that praying to a deity must be a religious universal: there cannot be any religion altogether devoid of prayer. Interestingly, prayer is a discourse that takes place in a solemn and polite manner.

10. Fakhr-Rohani (2019) is just a preliminary work of which many subsections can be well extended based on Islamic data from here and there in the Muslim world.

11. Both *Salawaat* and *bismillah* have so many uses and implicatures, both religious and non-religious (social, political, and educational, at least in the present-day Shiite Iranian context).

12. In each case, there is a certain prosodic and intonational structure that implies a distinctive sense. Such cases should be viewed as pragmatic-cum-prosodic religio-linguistic phenomena.

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